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ABSTRACT

The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act requires states to report learners' educational gains in terms of level descriptors defined by the National Reporting System (NRS). States may choose their assessment methods. Most use standardized testing. NRS level descriptors for English as a Second Language (ESL) define English language proficiency across six levels. The time required to show level gain in proficiency depends on program factors (e.g., class intensity and adequacy of facilities) and learner factors (e.g., age and educational background). Adult ESL standardized tests are easy to administer, valid, and reliable, though they may not capture incremental learning changes over short periods of time. Performance assessment in adult ESL reflects current beliefs that learners acquire language as they use it in social interactions to accomplish purposeful tasks. However, performance assessment for accountability purposes is limited. For both standardized and performance assessments, applying several principles will produce effective assessment procedures (e.g., select assessment instruments and procedures that match learning goals and know assessment limitations). Many critical issues must be examined before putting these principles into practice (e.g., conditions under which measurable gain can be achieved and resources needed to ensure consistent, reliable standardized assessment). (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (SM)

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Assessment with Adult English Language Learners

NATIONAL CENTER FOR ESL LITERACY EDUCATION

ED 461 305

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FL 801497

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Assessment with Adult English Language Learners

NATIONAL CENTER FOR ESL LITERACY EDUCATION

The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (Title II of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998) requires each state to report educational gains of learners in terms of level descriptors defined by the National Reporting System (NRS) document. This requirement has intensified the debate among practitioners, researchers, and policy makers as to what constitutes success and how to measure it. The NRS implementation document states that a standardized assessment procedure (a test or performance assessment) is to be used to measure level gains, but the choice of procedure is left up to each state. Most states have chosen a standardized test. Several give choices among a list of approved tests. A few states allow a standardized test for initial level determination and then a competency checklist or uniform portfolio for level exit.

Trends and Issues

Measuring learner gain

The NRS level descriptors for ESL define English language proficiency for speaking/listening, reading/writing, and functional and workplace skills across 6 levels. However, there is no research to support how long it takes to move from one NRS level to another. Such information is crucial so that learners, program staff, and funders can set realistic goals.

It takes several years to learn a language well (Thomas & Collier, 1997). The time it takes to show level gain on a proficiency scale depends on both program and learner factors.

Program factors include

- intensity of the classes (how long and how many times per week),
- training and experience of the instructors,
- adequacy of facilities (comfortable, well-lit), and
- resources available to both instructors and learners.

Learner factors include

- educational background (including literacy in the native language),
- age,
- experiences with trauma, and
- opportunities to use the language outside of instructional time.

Standardized testing

One way to test language development is through the use of a standardized test. Paper and pencil standardized tests are often used because they are easy to administer to groups, require minimal training for the test administrator, and have documentation of reliability (consistency of results over time) and validity (measuring what the test says it measures).

Despite these advantages, standardized tests also have limitations. They may not capture the incremental changes in learning that occur over short periods of instructional time. This is particularly a problem in adult education programs where learners may have only a few hours per week to devote to attending classes or where instruction is focused on a limited number of learner goals. Because it takes a long time to learn a language, learners may not have enough instructional time or broad enough instruction to demonstrate gain on a standardized test. Under these circumstances, the results of testing will have meaning to the learners and instructors only if the test content is related to the goals and content of the instruction and instructional time is sufficient. Programs need adequate resources to support test administration.

Performance assessment

Performance assessments require learners to use prior knowledge and recent learning to accomplish tasks that demonstrate what they know and can do. Teachers and learners like this type of assessment, because they can see the direct link between instruction and assessment. Examples of performance assessment tasks include oral or written reports (e.g., how to become a citizen), projects (e.g., researching, producing, and distributing a booklet on recreational opportunities available in the community), exhibitions, or demonstrations. A variety of performance assessments provide a more complete picture of a learner's abilities than can be gathered from performance on a standardized test.

In adult ESL, performance assessment reflects current thought about second language acquisition—learners acquire language as they use it in social interactions to accomplish purposeful tasks (e.g., finding out information, applying for a job). Performance may be assessed by documenting the successful completion of the task or by using rubrics to assess various dimensions of carrying out the task (e.g., rating oral presentation skills on a scale of 1 to 5). Both instructors and learners can be involved in the development of evaluation guidelines and rubrics and in the evaluation procedure itself.

Although performance assessments provide valuable information to learners, instructors, and other program staff, their use for accountability purposes is currently limited. To produce the reliable, hard data required for high stakes assessment, performance assessments would need to be standardized. That is, for each of the NRS functioning levels, tasks that represent level completion and guidelines and rubrics

FL801497

for evaluating performance on that level need to be developed, and evaluators need to be trained.

Policy

At the national level, the Workforce Investment Act and the NRS have set criteria that states must meet in order to receive federal funding, but states have leeway to set their own performance measures and assessment procedures for meeting the criteria. Certain states have instituted performance-based contracts by which programs receive money only for the learners who make certain gains. Not all program staff may be aware of these policies and who sets them. Their attitudes towards being required to use certain assessments may affect the assessment process and, hence, the results.

Best Practices

For both standardized and performance assessments, application of the following principles will produce effective assessment procedures:

- Clearly identify the purpose of the assessment (why the learners are being assessed) and what learning is to be assessed (e.g., increased speaking proficiency).
- Select assessment instruments and procedures that match the program's learning goals (e.g., an oral interview to show progress in speaking skills, writing samples to show progress in writing) and that engage learners so they are interested and will strive to do their best.
- Whenever possible, use multiple measures to present a more complete picture of what has been learned.
- Ensure that adequate resources are available to carry out the assessments (e.g., enough materials, comfortable environment, adequately trained administrators and scorers).
- Be aware of the limitations of the assessments selected.
- Remember that assessment is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. Share assessment results with learners and instructors, as well as with administrative staff and funders and the results as a basis for decisions.

However, to put these principles fully into practice, the following critical questions need to be resolved:

- Under what conditions can measurable gain be achieved?
- What is the interrelationship among measurable gain, the assessment procedures used, and the resources available to carry out the procedures?
- Are standardized tests currently in use able to adequately measure what learners know, can do, and have learned over short time spans?
- What resources (time, adequately trained staff) are needed to ensure consistent and reliable standardized assessment?
- Do programs have adequate resources (time, staff, staff training) to use performance assessments reliably?
- Can performance assessments adequately measure what learners know, can do, and have learned over a short time span?
- Are there differences in outcomes between states that require certain assessments and states that allow programs to choose?
- What impact do national, state, or local policies have on assessment procedures and outcomes?
- What policies need to be changed or created?

Conclusion

Over the past decade, the United States has made progress in creating a cohesive system of adult education through legislation such as the Workforce Investment Act. Answers to the critical questions listed above will continue to move the field forward in solving the complexities of defining learner progress.

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